

Opinion

MAKING THE GRADE: What makes a good elected public official?

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Of The Oakland Press

In truth, most taxpayers are not intimately familiar with what a township supervisor, mayor, state lawmaker, sheriff or county commissioner does on a day-to-day basis.

We in the newspaper business have a closer perspective, though admittedly, it has its distortions. We are often partial to those public servants who help us do our jobs.

Yet, we see them functioning, often face-to-face, and are positioned to learn their sentiments and character traits as well as their accomplishments and failures.

In the spirit of the New Year, Oakland Press reporters and editors were asked to list their favorite elected officials at the state, county and local levels. We guaranteed our staff members anonymity in terms of their comments and selections. They are, after all, called upon to be “fair and balanced” — and, by the way, we feel we are better at that task than Fox News, which lays exclusive claim to that slogan.

It has been a bad year for elected officials, especially in Lansing and Washington, D.C. Faced with arguably the worst economic times since the Depression, taxpayers are not happy. Many of them are unemployed. Many are upset by the perception that big business has been bailed out but the man on the street has gotten nothing.

Plus, Michigan has the worst economy in the nation. Our governor and Legislature deserve some of the blame.

That said, the responses from our team here at The Oakland Press might prove informative. Many taxpayers simply trust their elected officials to study public issues on their behalf and make the best decisions possible. That is what representative government is designed to do.

As for our honor roll of elected officials, is it any surprise that top mention goes to Oakland County Executive L. Brooks Patterson? He is an enduring giant, a modern icon.

“I feel very comfortable having Brooks Patterson as the county executive,” said one of our staff members. “It probably has something to do with the fact I’m a fiscal conservative.

“It seems Patterson always has the county looking forward and keeps its budget in line, making tough cuts when needed. He’s not going to get the county mired in a budget mess like we have in the state. He’s not afraid to stand up to (Gov. Jennifer) Granholm and the powers that be in Wayne and Macomb counties with our interests in mind. Also, his aggression in trying to draw businesses to the county is something that doesn’t get much attention, but certainly is money well spent.”

"From my perspective, he and his staff are not only on top of things going on in Oakland County financially, but have a pinpoint view of ALL that's wrong in Lansing and Washington," said another staffer.

"I think L. Brooks Patterson has been a model leader," said another of our journalists. "He has maintained a consistent focus on keeping the county strong and vibrant. Further, he has put quality people in top positions. He has come up with innovative ideas or supported the innovative ideas of others to make the county strong, such as the creation of Automation Alley, support of small business, efforts to win new businesses, the creation of Arts, Beats & Eats in Pontiac and the fundraising for community charities on the part of employees. In addition, he is never afraid to say what he thinks on any topic. And he answers reporters' questions in a timely manner, regardless of whether the topic is controversial."

Another praised Patterson's "experience, humor (which we need when faced with the absurdity of so many situations), vision and progressive action. Instead of whining, he takes action."

OK, enough about Brooks Patterson. Here are the others:

"I think a person who can manage to keep the focus of his or her board or council (or cabinet and staff) on the agreed-to mission, goals and objectives despite the barrage of political and personal influences and/or attacks has the key characteristic of a good leader. For this reason, I think Damon Dorkins has been a good leader, especially in comparison to previous (Pontiac school) board presidents. In part, it was because he was able to maintain a bloc that voted with him as the board began to lose that cohesiveness that carried them through almost two years. He has also made it a practice to return calls from the media and answer questions despite how controversial the topic."

"Rochester Hills Council President Jim Rosen is a good leader as is Mayor Bryan Barnett, who was Student Congress president at Oakland University as a student. Rosen is fair and respectful to everyone on the council, even if he doesn't agree with them, and keeps the meetings moving. Barnett appears to be able to work well with the council and continues to come up with ways to bring new businesses and tax revenue into the city and maintain the quality of life."

"(County Commissioner) Mattie Hatchett and (State Rep.) Tim Melton work hard to find solutions to the problems of their constituents and the county and state as a whole."

"Tim Melton has gone out of his way to work with the public on the issue of public education reform," said another.

Hatchett represents Pontiac and Melton represents Pontiac and Auburn Hills.

"(State Sen.) Mike Bishop for standing his ground, but willing to compromise." Bishop's district includes much of northeastern Oakland County.

"I'll add my two cents with two elected officials who always go out of their way to be friendly and always come up and say hello. One is Waterford Township Supervisor Carl Solden, a Democrat. Always friendly, always willing to talk about anything for five minutes or an hour.

"Same goes for Oakland County Sheriff Michael Bouchard, a Republican.

"How's that for bipartisanship?"

"After serving on the Orion Township Board of Trustees, Matthew Gibb ran for supervisor in 2008 after the incumbent chose not to seek re-election. Gibb has worked diligently both to see that projects already in the works came to fruition while also leading the way on new and innovative initiatives that help the township attract and maintain business and residents. Some quick hits: Working to save the GM plant, a new Web site to pitch Orion to everyone from international businesses to people simply looking to relocate, setting up business districts that make it easier for businesses to get tax breaks, continuing work on a water

retention plan with GM that will save both GM and Orion residents big bucks on water bills, plus he's made some very difficult and deep cuts to keep the township solvent. Gibb has also utilized all the latest in technology to communicate with anyone who's interested, including Facebook and Twitter. He's also been very accessible and very open with us."

"Supervisor Bill Dunn takes a no-politics-necessary attitude toward running Oxford Township. Oxford was among the first to feel the effects of the residential housing bust. While responding meant making cuts — layoffs and severe downsizing or outsourcing of entire departments — Bill seems to look at it simply as doing what needed to be done to keep the township solvent. Some townships are still struggling with whether to keep a building department but staff it more sparsely, etc. These issues were dealt with years ago in Oxford."

"After a stint in the state House where he was known for his common-sense approach in a town of partisan bluster, Mike Kowall has transitioned well to local government as White Lake Township supervisor. The tax base has grown as the township has attracted several major retailers along M-59. He clearly ran for public office for the right reasons."

"Margaret Birch, Waterford Township, treasurer: Outgoing, involved ... She attends events and supports activities unrelated to her own promotion. I've seen her working with the chamber to help bring in business to the township. She isn't a phony and is enthused about people and life around the county."

"Dave Payne, Bloomfield Township supervisor: Experienced, professional, no-nonsense, always provides a straight answer and if he doesn't know, he'll direct a caller to the right department. He has even called back while on vacation."

"Aron Lorenz, Sylvan Lake mayor: Patient, thoughtful, good listener, isn't afraid to get down in the trenches and do research."

"Oakland County Clerk Ruth Johnson makes herself readily available to the public and the press. She constantly gives informational events for the public and for election workers."

"Oakland Chief Judge Wendy Potts has worked hard to explain the court's workings to the public. She too makes herself readily available to the public and the press."

"State Sen. Nancy Cassis of Novi, unfortunately term-limited, has made herself a superior watchdog of the public till and an expert on taxation."

"County Treasurer Andy Meisner has a soft spot for journalists and is always good for a quote. He is passionate about people and ideas."

"County Commissioner Tim Greimel, who represents parts of Pontiac and Auburn Hills, attends all manner of meetings that affect his constituents and appears unselfish with his time."

"State Reps. Marty Knollenberg of Troy and Tom McMillin of Rochester saw an unmet need and organized town hall meetings when the public was demanding them, even though the issues were outside their bailiwicks."

"State Rep. Marie Donigan of Royal Oak has made herself an expert on mass transit, for which projects may one day see fruition after decades of vision."

"State Rep. Chuck Moss of Birmingham is a policy leader among House Republicans and very responsive."

So there you have it. If you'll notice in the comments, the virtue most often mentioned pertains to a character or personality trait, not to a political philosophy. Maybe there is something to that: It is less important what your opinion is and more important what type of human being you are.

May this be a better year for public servants and the commonwealth.

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